

Virgil, *Aeneid* (II)

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Virgil's *Aeneid* is one of the most important poems of ancient Rome and one of the most influential of Western literature. It begins at the end of the Trojan War, with the fall of Troy and tells of the hero Aeneas' travels from Greece to Italy to dominate the lands which will become the Roman empire. Both its style and content were textbook examples of poetry over the centuries. The *Aeneid* is a multifaceted epic poem and, naturally, since its composition at the end of the 1st century AD, it has been interpreted in a wide variety of ways. The *Aeneid* asks provocative questions for us at the end of CVSP 201, not only about the Hellenistic tradition, but also about heroism in a time of Roman imperial pretensions. ***How does the hero change when the frame of action shifts from the polis to an empire?***



Important characters in the Aeneid:

Aeneas – our hero with a mission to found an empire
Anchises – Aeneas's father
Ascanius Iulus – Aeneas's son
Creusa – Aeneas's Trojan wife
Dido – Queen of Carthage; Aeneas's lover
Lavinia – Aeneas's Roman wife
Jupiter – father of the gods; he supports Aeneas and his mission
Juno – wife of Jupiter; she opposes Aeneas
Turnus – Aeneas' opponent, leads Italians
Venus – goddess of love and Aeneas's mother; she aids Aeneas to achieve his epic goals.

In addition to being a story depicting a hero confronting adversity in the natural world, ***epics*** are also poems which dramatize the origin (and future) of cultures. ***Epics typically have a political dimension***, and they deal with founding and building a state, or in the case of the *Aeneid*, an empire. They do so by

- describing the ideal leader of the state
- celebrating the warrior virtues that created the state, and allow it to remain victorious over other states
- describing and defining the people of the state, and celebrating foundational moments in its creation as well as the virtues of their culture and character

Some central tensions of the Aeneid: Juno's divine wrath and Aeneas' human piety; passions vs. duty; violence vs. stability

"Tell me, Muse, the causes of ***her anger***. How did he violate the will of the Queen of the Gods? What was his offence? Why did she drive a man famous for ***his piety*** to such endless hardship and such suffering? Can there be so much ***anger*** in the hearts of the heavenly gods?" (3)

THE FINAL LINES OF THE AENEID: "Burning with mad passion and terrible in his wrath ... blazing with rage, Aeneas plunged the steel full into his enemy's breast. The limbs of Turnus were dissolved in cold and his life left him with a groan, fleeing, resentful, down to the shades." (332)

WHAT IS STOICISM?: Stoicism in colloquial English means an indifference to pleasure or pain. Its origin in the doctrine of the Stoic philosophers refers to a belief that moral and intellectual perfection necessarily means an indifference to fear, envy, passionate love, etc. Virgil's hero Aeneas must act stoically, putting duty above all such emotions.

Contrast this kind of heroism with the "peace of mind" and withdrawn contemplation of Lucretius.

TIMELINE OF 1ST CENTURY BCE ROME

98	Lucretius born	31	<i>Battle of Actium – Antony & Cleopatra</i>
70	Publius Vergilius Maro (Virgil) born	29	Octavian (Augustus) returns from Egypt
62	Pompey annexes Syria and Lebanon	27	Octavian takes the name Augustus
58	Lucretius' <i>The Nature of Things</i>	19	Virgil dies
44	Caesar killed, "Great Fear" begins	15	Augustus settles in Phoenicia;
42-39	Virgil writes <i>Bucolics</i>		begins the Roman Temple of Jupiter
39-31	political strife, Virgil writes <i>Georgics</i>		in Heliopolis (Baalbek)

We are meant to understand in the events of the story of Aeneas' life the history of Roman civilization itself! Does he Virgil suggest that we see Aeneas as a model of Augustus: a strong ruler who understands how to use his power in order to create a strong state?

TRANSLATIO IMPERII: the "translation (i.e. transfer) of empire" from Greece to Rome.

"The *Aeneid* is preoccupied with power before any other subject." -Denis Feeny

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE AENEID

Book 1: history of Rome, prophecy of Aeneas' destiny

Book 3: Aeneas and his men wander the Mediterranean and buries his father's bones in Sicily

Book 4: Aeneas in Carthage with Dido

Book 5: Aeneas reaches Sicily

Book 7: Italian wars with Turnus; Lavinia said to marry a foreigner

Book 8: glorious future of Rome

Books 9-11: Aeneas' men and the Latins prepare for war

Book 12: confrontation of Turnus and Aeneas, wrathful murder of Turnus

THE UNDERWORLD IS BACK!

Book 6: Aeneas visits the underworld



Virgil is led by a Sibyl through the underworld where he meets his father, Anchises. He learns the secrets of the reincarnation of souls and sees heroes from both his past *and his future!*

THREE FACETS OF THE AENEID

- ***the POETIC reading:*** Virgil reworks Homer's two epics, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, reinvents many of their scenes, recasting them for a new Roman worldview. His poem contributes to the theme of a "translation of empire." Many authors through the medieval and early modern period copied, in turn, the structure and themes of Virgil's work.
 - ❖ From the destruction of their city, the Trojan are forced to leave home, to go create a new home, a new Troy, to dominate that new place and to bring new order to it.
 - ❖ Dido, the new Kalypso; Aeneid Book 6 is the new *Odyssey*, Book 10.
 - ❖ Which model of the hero, Homer's Odysseus or Virgil's Aeneas, do you appreciate more?

Compare this idea with Gilgamesh and the Odyssey

- ***the ETHICAL reading:*** Virgil develops in the figure of Aeneas a new kind of stoic heroism; the "pious" Aeneas must learn to dominate his passions, suppress his own desires, and subordinate his individual will, as a citizen of the cosmopolis, to larger good.
 - ❖ in the Underworld, he realizes that his sacrifices are not only for a general duty good for his own life, but they also contribute to the good and the destiny of his descendants.
 - ❖ How does the vision of the Augustan ruler compare with Plato's idea of the philosopher-ruler?
 - ❖ Can we enjoy poetry and take out of it useful lessons or should we distrust the poets and their version of ethics and history?

Compare this with the philosophical views found in Socrates, Plato, Aristotle.

- ***the HISTORICAL OR POLITICAL reading:*** Virgil's poem is full of references to the history of Rome and Aeneas is depicted as the one who lays the foundations for empire. The glory of Rome emerges from the glory of Greece.
 - ❖ How does this Roman republic compare with Plato's republic?
 - ❖ Aeneas' destiny and Rome's destiny are depicted as a plan of the gods unfolding through history. This historical and political dimension of Virgil's poem is also one that is absent in Homer's two epics.

Compare with Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius.

David Quint, Epic and Empire: "The Aeneid has, in fact, decisively transformed epic for posterity into both a genre that was committed to imitating and attempting to "overgo" its earlier versions and a genre that was overtly political: Virgil's epic is tied to a specific national history, to the idea of world domination, to a monarchical system, even to a particular dynasty. From now on, future epic poets would emulate the Aeneid itself along with the Homeric epics; future imperial dynasts would turn for epic inspiration less to Achilles [the angry hero of the Iliad] than to Aeneas, a hero deliberately created for political reflection."

THOUGHT QUESTIONS FOR THE END OF CVSP 201:

- Can a hero completely surrender his passions to his duty? What about human beings?
- What kinds of new violence are required to bring order to a society submerged in civil war?
- What kinds of violence are required to keep an empire going for thousands of years?
- What brought about empire? Who are the heroes of empire? How can empire be lost?
- Can a city run an empire, **and** encourage free contemplation of its citizens?
- How does poetry express complexities and ambiguities, particularly about violence, war and politics, in ideas differently than philosophy?
- Did Virgil's poetry kill the Homeric ideals?